



UNDER CONSTRUCTION

80.7 in x 88 in x 76.6 in
204.9 cm x 215.9 cm x 194.5 cm
WIDTH x DEPTH x HEIGHT

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Not Roman Holiday

"Hi, I'm crazy," is the first thing he says when he introduces himself to the class. He's a late transfer, not too unusual considering the school, but usually people care more for their reputation. They're all kids of prominence, and money. Maybe he's rebelling, which wouldn't be strange.

Later he offers to show you his certification. That he's certifiably crazy, has the papers to prove it.

"I'm not sure I want to talk to you," you say dubiously. You're blunt, forthright, a little too honest. It's gotten you into trouble more times than it should have, but that's not weird considering where you are. Then again, you wouldn't have fit in anyway, a middle class kid from an "ethnic," as they call it, background. Multiethnic is the problem. At least if you could claim to be Mexican then there'd be a niche for you. But thus far you've resisted all attempts by the authorities who try to squash you into ESL classes (you want to say, "I speak better English than you do," but if you did then you'd get kicked out, and you may be headstrong and foolhardy but you certainly aren't stupid) and you're too smart. Sometimes you wish you were stupider.

Instead of being offended, he laughs. "I'm not homicidal crazy, just cracked," he explains. You scowl and look at him askance, but for the first week he doesn't do anything really strange, you start to relax. You don't stop giving him the hairy eyeball. But you relax. Sometimes you even get used to his presence.

Which is weird. Nobody likes you, they leave you alone. And you like that. You prefer books to people.

"How do you know," you ask one day. The two of you are behind the library. It's closed today, which is why you aren't inside. You usually help the librarian during your breaks.

You wonder what you did--besides being a loner--to make him attach himself to you. And honestly you wish he hadn't.

"Know?"

You shrug. Gesture at him vaguely. He understands. That concerns you a bit.

"I snapped at Barney's," he says, chewing on a mint leaf. The smell is sharp in the cold air. A leaf falls on your hair.

"In London," you say. It's not a question, considering who he is, where you are. The kids in your class are always talking about flying over "the pond" to London, and "nipping over" to Barney's, so unfortunately the name is a familiar one.

He shrugs.

"Why?"

"They didn't have my shirt." He points at the one he's wearing. It's actually a few seasons behind in fashion. "It wasn't in stock any more," he clarifies.

You just nod, not really understanding what he's saying. It's not like temper tantrums aren't the norm for the kids here. They're all spoiled little rich brats. You don't see how that could cause his parents to shuffle him off to this place, except that it's probably just a temporary punishment, nor how it's unusual. You just nod so he might go away. He doesn't.

You don't really get it until you go to where he's staying. Not his house. Where he's staying--with his governess.

Because people like him still have those.

There's nothing personal in his room. It looks like something out of a magazine, with big French windows that open out to a balcony that overlooks the sea, with billowing curtains. His bed set matches. All of the furniture matches too, and it's all made of gleaming, red varnished wood. The marble floor practically shines.

He has exactly twenty-five shirts in his closet, all identical, but in different colors. Black, white, maroon, green, navy. Five each. Actually, there's one less of the navy. You check the tag--there isn't one, just an embroidered label. Golden thread. Barney's.

So that's what he was talking about.

Three blazers, maroon, black, and cream.

All of his pants are khaki.

You don't even want to look at his shoes.

A woman brings a tea set in before you force yourself to, saving you from your own morbid curiosity. It's an honest to god tea set too, on a silver tray, with saucers, and silver teaspoons, and a bowl of sugar cubes. Two tiny carafes, one with milk, the other with honey.

He winds up telling you about his parents. You didn't want to know.

"Mother and father," he doesn't call them mom and dad, "they have their problems. And it's not like I don't understand, except that they are stupid."

You leave disconcerted. It's not that you think that rich people don't have problems. Hell, you know better than anyone that they do. And it isn't that you think he shouldn't complain, that you have more problems than he does, so he shouldn't get to complain to you. You're disconcerted because you'd very much like to punch his mother and father, and you just don't do that sort of thing.

He winds up in your bed. He came over saying that he needed to talk and be alone. You tell him those two things are contradictory, and why would he come to you. He laughs.

"You're the best of both worlds," he says when he plops himself down on your Ninja Turtles coverlet. Secretly you think he should go home. And you're embarrassed, a little. Your room is so cramped, so messy and gross compared to his. But it's yours and you refuse to be ashamed, even if the walls are mostly peeling of their paint, at least you've covered up most of the holes with your band posters.

You do, however, push the piles of dirty clothes into your closet, shoving it closed as it groans and creaks from the abuse. To distract yourself, you turn on the radio. It's playing something by Nirvana.

He winds up falling asleep in the middle of telling about his parents' fifth, current, divorce. This after telling about the other half dozen divorces between them marrying and divorcing each other. Amazingly, or fortunately, enough, he's the only kid they had together.

Scowling, you stare at him snoring away, while picking at your threadbare pillow cover and trying to decide what to do with him. You decide on kicking him off the bed.

"Hey!"

"This isn't Roman Holiday," you growl at him. "You're too ugly to be Audrey Hepburn."

When he finally stops laughing he stares up at you and you stare down at him from where you're hanging slightly off the bed, the pillow crushed to your chest.

"May I kiss you?" he asks, all politeness.

"No," you say immediately. He doesn't have poor little rich boy syndrome, just OCD, so he grins and turns over on your floor, pillows his head on one arm and closes his eyes. He doesn't say anything regarding the cleanliness of the carpet, or anything similarly derogatory. It doesn't even look as though he's considered it.

Maybe you answered too fast.

"Just thought I'd ask," he says. Then, restlessly, he turns over again to stare at your ceiling. "I didn't know you played football."

It takes you a second to realize he's talking about soccer. "Yeah," you grunt, rolling onto your back to stare at your cracked ceiling too. You wonder if he sees the same thing you do, that is, a dog and a man in a bowler hat, or if he just sees a dirty, disrepaired ceiling.

"We moved around too much for me to participate in sports," he says. "Although I did play cricket for a time."

"Cricket is not a sport," you tell him.

"...I'm tired of them dragging me about like a rag doll."

You push your finger through one of the holes in your blanket and say, "yeah."

"Hey," he says, getting up on his knees and leaning his elbows on your bed. The springs creak in protest.

"What do you want."

"Can I kiss you?" he asks again.

You glare at him and scowl. "Fine," you say, but only to shut him up.

The radio stopped playing music a while ago, it's just the DJs talking now, and the light from

your window is too bright, and it's too hot in your room. Stifling. Unbearable.

You practically smash your faces together. He probably expected this to be soft, sweet, but you just want to get it over with. Your hand winds up fisted in his hair, and it's damp with sweat, and suddenly you find yourself tipped over, the kiss turning gentle, and he sucks on your tongue. And instead of just stopping, you feel your knees turning to water (it's a good thing you're already laying down) and end up tugging him onto your bed.

He's on top of you, his weight kind of reassuring on you and when you break apart he rests his forehead against yours. His hand is kind of petting the bristles of your slightly grown buzz cut. He runs his tongue along the back of your teeth lazily. It feels strange.

"You're crazy," you tell him.

His laugh stutters against your sticky skin. "Yeah."

Steady as She Goes

You found the bikes in the summer time, bent and rusted and tossed into the reservoir right by the high school. It was almost too hot to breathe, but he dug them out of the heap that had accumulated there over the years and looked so proud after you didn't have the heart to tell him that the bikes were far too small. Not that he didn't know it. Because they were pretty obviously kids' bikes and both of you were about four feet too tall to hope to sit down on them. You don't have the heart to tell him that your parents got you a new one to take with you.

He fixes them up, between work and summer classes because he failed his math class even though you offered to tutor him, but he insisted that he could do everything on his own so you let him. But also you know the teacher hated his guts anyway, so even if you did help him, Mrs. Sanders would accuse him of cheating. You lay on the discarded mattress in his garage while he works on the bikes, sweat prickling on your skin as you think about just how dirty the thing is and how you'll probably have to take about three showers to get all the dust off. Sometimes he'll take a break and flop onto the mattress right next to you, causing the springs to groan ominously and a cloud of dirt to fly, making you both sneeze before he can get the garage door open.

Eventually, when the dust settles, you both lay back down and watch the moths gather around the bare light bulb that swings from the ceiling. Even at night the air feels stale and stagnant. You both feel your impending departure like a hive of ants under your skin, but neither of you say anything about it.

You because you know it makes him feel like shit even though it isn't his fault that he was born with dyslexia and you live in a small town that doesn't have the funding or inclination to accommodate people with alternative learning styles. You want to change that, plan on coming back after college, after getting your degree, after learning all the things that you can. You haven't told him yet, because whenever you try the words always get stuck in your throat, somewhere between your heart and your tongue and you can't ever knock them free, haven't been able to for the past three years since you decided. It's just, you're scared to think that he'll leave you behind even though you're the one that's going.

You don't know why he doesn't but you figure it has something to do with why his face crumples a bit whenever he looks at you lately.

Finally, about a week before you're supposed to leave--even though you haven't packed anything and you don't want to, don't want to leave even though the university is everything you wanted, everything except him--the bikes are fixed.

Of course he gives you the one with sparkly pink streamers coming from the handlebars, grinning cheekily all the while. Making a face at him, you hop onto the bike, half hoping it will collapse beneath you so that you don't have to watch him look so proud of himself, hoping that you won't have this last moment together, and it won't be perfect because your heart just might break if you do. But it doesn't, and you do. It's too late for anyone else to be out, almost three in the morning, but for you two it's the perfect time.

In all you want to be selfish. Every day you hate the fact that you're leaving and you can't take him with you because he has a sick mother and an asshole father, and hasn't even graduated yet. And there you are, about to go to university on a scholarship for your good

academics, couldn't even find the courage to tell him that you were accepted until three weeks later, when everyone else got their letters too. You just wanted to maintain the illusion longer, because if you said anything then the tenuous threads of normalcy would be broken. You couldn't pretend that you'd stay together forever. And you fear what he'd say about you wanting that.

You ride through the empty streets, eyes mostly on each other, grinning, panting, pedaling the ridiculously small bikes. Finally you stop, but only because he almost runs into Mr. Hatch's truck because he has it parked on the side of the road and he wasn't looking where he was going because he was staring at you. So he winds up wiping out on the grass.

When you run to his side, you can feel your heart in your throat and ice in your stomach. But he just grins up at you, saying, "Did you see that!" like it's the best thing he ever did. Laughter rips itself out of your lungs with relief and you collapse next to him, half on him, but not without giving him a solid sock to the shoulder first. For a while you both stare up at the street lamp.

Planning is not your strong point, but as you flip over, you manage, somehow, to get your feet and limbs tangled together and finally wind up with your stomachs together, with you staring into his eyes. He has grass stuck in his hair and as you reach to pull it out, your fingers brush his cheek and he closes his eyes, almost looking angry, sad.

So you kiss him.

Well, not at first. First you just brush your lips over his, barely touching but when he opens his eyes and realizes you're doing that, doing it on purpose, and his hands grip your hips, closing spasmodically like he can't help himself, you both move toward each other like you can't bear to be separated.

He groans like he's dying and you grip his shirt like he's the only thing holding you together because, well, he kind of is. And neither of you thinks about the fact that you're making out on his neighbor's lawn at four in the morning.

Dominoes

You've been avoiding him since he went to college. Well, that's a lie since the last time you saw each other was that damn party, during his spring break, the one you didn't want to go to but your sister insisted. Because you were supposed to be her designated driver.

Hence why you were completely and sadly sober while practically everyone else was sloshed. You would have asked why your sister needed a designated driver, since your home was only on the other side of the block, and you didn't have your license yet, but then she picked you up from the grocery store with her friends packed in the back seat like sardines and, well, that's pretty much how she was, always volunteering to help everyone unless they were family. It wasn't like you or your dad counted anyway.

Maybe she would have been more stable if your mom had stuck around but then again, maybe not.

So there you were, stuck on the flight of stairs in his house when he appears out of nowhere, plops himself down right next to you and leans his head on your shoulder. He smells drunk, or at least like someone decided to douse him in an entire keg of beer. But his hair smells nice, and that's what you decide to concentrate on, even though his mere presence puts you on edge like you're rock climbing without a rope and almost at the summit. Exhilaration and fear. Not that you'd admit it, but your favorite feeling.

He nuzzled his face into your throat and you swallowed and clutched at his shoulders.

"Hey," he said.

The rest of that memory is kind of incoherent mostly because someone had struck a joint right next to you, started passing it around, but also because he didn't particularly say anything coherent in the first place, just murmured nonsense at you and traced your ear, your jaw, your neck, your collarbone with a languid finger.

And this even after you kissed him at his graduation party. And he punched you.

So when he started tugging at your clothes, pulling you toward his bedroom, well someone had to make the right choice but it wasn't going to be you.

Not that you did anything.

Once he slammed the door closed, after chasing out more than a couple people, and started taking off his clothes, the marijuana started making you nauseated and you couldn't stop shaking. But when he started in on your clothes, it's not like you tried to stop him.

All you remember after that is warmth and wanting to lick his skin, to see if the candy color tasted that way too. You don't even remember what it looked like, beyond colorful, really, have no idea what the design is but you know, somehow, that it suited him. He must have gotten the tattoo while he was away, and you wondered what his life was like there, if he liked it better, but that's when you passed out.

Nothing happened at that party, but waking up in the morning to an empty bed and dragging your sister back home while she smelled like vomit and a brewery, well it wasn't exactly the highlight of your life.

Avoiding him was easy. He lived on campus, fifty miles away, and only came back sometimes, on weekends, and--obviously--during spring break. He doesn't come back for summer because he's taking extra classes. Much to your relief.

But of course that's where your good fortune runs out.

You aren't even sure why he's at your house, but he appears in your kitchen and you freeze, and begin to slowly back up but then there's that damn step. The step that creaks no matter where you put your weight, which you forgot about in your panic. He looks at you and you feel like your heart's about to thump right out of your chest.

"Hey," he says, and you grunt something that might or might not resemble an actual word, and then hightail it back to your room. So nobody's accused you of being your best right after waking up, but this has to take the cake. Briefly you consider climbing out of your window, but that gets dismissed offhand as ridiculous. At least unless something dire happens.

Which, of course, it does. The stair creaks, which means he's coming up and the only thing on the second floor is bedrooms and a bathroom, but there's one downstairs too, so that's not why he's coming up.

You're about halfway through your window when he opens your door.

"Don't!" He lunges at you from across the room, just as your foot slips from the branch of the tree that you were about to shimmy down and for a second you think this is it, you're going to die, but of course you only wind up nutting yourself on the window sill.

You may be curled up, almost crying in pain, but there's something about the way that he gapes, and makes little choking noises and starts to laugh hysterically that makes you laugh too. Quite a few octaves higher than his, but you're laughing, which is probably a step or two above dead.

Then his hand curls around your wrist and pulls you down from the window, which he slams shut. He leans forward, presses you against the glass, and his face is in your neck again.

"Sorry," he says. And even though he says it lightly you can pretty much tell he doesn't just mean scaring you.

"I might forgive you," you mumble against the crown of his head. His arms tighten around you at that, and then you find yourself herded toward your bed.

He pulls you down and you both bounce slightly. For a moment you just curl up against his chest, clutching at the hem of his shirt. His hand slides along your back like he's trying to make sure you're still there, and when you try to pull away he clutches you tighter, so you let it go, let go. You stay like that until sunset, and your sister comes home. Somewhere along the way you fell asleep listening to his heartbeat, but when you wake up he doesn't. He merely stirs a bit and grips you even tighter, even though you're both pretty much drenched in sweat.

"Hey," he croaks when he finally wakes. You want to jokingly ask if that's the only word he knows but instead you kiss him. You kiss him the same way you wanted every moment you were avoiding him, and think well maybe it was worth it. And life goes on.

The One Where They Make It

So you've got this thing for him.

Maybe a big thing. (No innuendo intended.)

(Okay. Maybe a little innuendo.)

But anyway, it's not like this isn't something that's happened before. Pretty much all of your crushes have more or less existed on a continuum of humiliation and abject fear of discovery and you have this habit of falling for exactly the wrong person. So yeah, you've got this thing down pat. You can handle it. Totally. No sweat.

You can think of plenty of reasons why you can't be together. After all, he's pretty much the most anal person (again, with the innuendo) you know and you, well, you can hardly keep your pet fish alive. In fact, you're pretty sure that the fish is actually already dead and some sort of brain eating bacteria has taken up in its body and any day now your fish will be gone and then you'll hear about a zombie outbreak in Mumbai. Wherever that is.

You count it as an accomplishment if you make it out of your bed before noon. He arranges his books by ISBN.

Maybe that's kind of your fault, since you started going through his books when he was moving into his new apartment and began arranging them in that order, and then got distracted because you had to open the books to check the ISBN and then you wound up reading them and left a third on the shelves, half stayed in the boxes, and the rest were thrown on the floor as you read them.

And, alright, he's not the worst person you've ever had a crush on because he's actually your friend and it is kind of feasible that in some way there is the possibility that you might have a fighting chance of actually, well, y'know, because he's your friend. You talk to him. And that makes it infinitely worse because *he's your friend*. And you'd like to keep that, would rather keep that than make out with him, even if he does have really cute lips that look really soft and you'd really just like to bite down on them and suck on them until they're red, spit-slick, and swollen because they're really ridiculously shell pink, like perfectly shell pink and that doesn't really sit right with you any more than his equally ridiculous pale skin that you'd like to mark up with hickeys, especially his neck, because he has a tendency to poke at his bruises and he'd do that and remember exactly how he got them and that...

That would get to you. A lot.

In retrospect, you're really grateful that you sit in front of him in class, because his neck would be...distracting. Is distracting. Especially when you hang out together *because you're friends*. Except you haven't been doing that a lot lately. Hanging out, that is.

It makes sense that he's been avoiding you. Somehow. It's safe to assume you did something wrong because, well, usually there's some sort of reason.

What you don't expect, however, is for him to come to the library, finally, after about two weeks of silence and not turning around in your seat during Lit class. When he appears at

the elevator, you turn right around in the stairwell and race back up to the floor where you'd been studying, heart racing, like you were the one avoiding him. Which doesn't make any sense, you tell yourself, even as you scuttle into a secluded corner in the stacks.

He knows you go to the library during your breaks. It's kind of your thing, so what is he doing, you ask yourself, if he's avoiding you, well how does he justify coming to the place you usually hang out. That's just not fair, you weren't prepared to see him yet.

"Hey."

Shrieking is not undignified if you're surprised. Which you are. For the record, you didn't know that he'd been training as a ninja while he was avoiding you.

"Why are you avoiding me?"

You flail, making furious shushing gestures and generally looking like you're doing some sort of interpretive dance from somewhere foreign. Maybe Japan, they do weird stuff right?

"We're in a library," you hiss indignantly, "be quiet."

He blinks at you. "We're the only ones on this floor."

And it's true. This level doesn't have any seating, except for a few chairs that look like they were made in the early 60s and haven't had the upholstery changed in the interim (and, well, college students,) so they look a bit like...puke. Suffice it to say, nobody really hangs out on this level because all of the computers are in the shiny new wing of the library, where the walls are all glass and the chairs are indecently comfortable. Without the two of you talking the floor is deadening quiet, the kind of quiet that sucks up everything into the void until it hurtles, screaming into the atmosphere and dies a painful death due to the lack of oxygen and native pressure. "Stop with your logic."

"So?" He's going to corner you. He's cornering you. He has cornered you. But he left an opening, and you take advantage of it, ducking under his arm and making your escape. "Hey!"

That's just not fair. Evasion is supposed to be a non-contact sport. "You're the one avoiding me," you say, hoping you don't sound like you're whining. Nobody likes whiners. "So you can go back to doing that."

"I wasn't avoiding you." He puts his hand on your head like he usually does, not quite ruffling your hair like other people usually do. "You were...I guess not avoiding me, but you haven't exactly been looking at me."

"Are you going to say something cheesy like, oh, say, because I haven't been looking at you, I didn't notice you looking at me or something because can we just not?" You scrunch your nose.

"I wouldn't say you haven't been looking at me, more like...not looking at my face."

Well, his neck is really distracting.

"That's your fault," you insist, still not looking at his face and instead being extremely interested in his shoulder. His shirt is very grey.

He tilts your head back a little with his hand, but you say, "no," and look away.

Which is when he backs you into the bookshelf.

Unfortunately, the footstool for helping people get books from the top shelves is right behind your feet, and you wind up tripping and (thankfully) smacking your bottom on its top step. Fortunately, he's still trying to tilt your head upward, so you don't wind up with your face in his junk.

Unfortunately that gives you a very good view of his neck, since he's leaning over you and you strangle a whimper in your throat. Which results in something that sounds like a fart. From your throat.

Fortunately—or maybe unfortunately? You're not sure at this point any more, nothing makes sense—he doesn't seem to mind. All he says is, "Yeah, that's the look."

And his face starts to descend toward yours.

So, logically, the only choice is...

You headbutt him.

Human Error

It starts with just the lift of his shirt, and the barest sliver of skin while you're playing soccer together; a team building thing, since you would never play it voluntarily, but your mentor thought that it would be good to have the entire group of grad students working under her tutelage play together, so they could get to know one another.

The entire collar of his crewneck is drenched in sweat, as is his neck, which should be gross but somehow it isn't, even though he's using said collar to mop at his face—hence why you got a flash of his hip. He combs his fingers through the thick flop of curls that lay across his forehead and grins at one of the people who was on his team before you tear your gaze away and tug at the laces of your cleats, which are more than a few years old, and more than a little bit cramped, since your parents bought them for you when you were in high school, with no mind as to your tastes and inclinations. The last time you'd played soccer before they got them was in elementary school, and the only time you used them was to help your sister prepare for tryouts.

A shadow falls over you when you manage to pull them off and are struggling with your socks.

"Well, I'd offer to shake hands," someone says from behind you—you tilt your head back and squint against the sun—it's him, "but I think yours are full."

Which is exactly when the sock finally pops off and the force sends you rocking slightly backward. Against his legs.

"Woah there," he says, placing a hand on your shoulder. It's too warm, and large. "Woah! Jesus."

You panic and wonder what you did wrong, but he's not looking at your face. You track his gaze to your foot—which is blistered and rubbed red and raw. In a flash he's kneeling next to you, pulling your other leg straight out so he can grab your other sock, and before you can do anything he pulls it off, so quickly that you don't even register the pain before it's bare in the morning chill air. A shudder runs through you.

He hisses. "The skin on the bottom of your feet looks like minced meat," he says, eyes narrowed. A huge furrow appears between his eyes and he picks up one of your cleats, pulls the tongue out, and then flips it to look at the sole. His lips pull back on his teeth. "You've never even used these before, have you?"

"I have used them before," you say, feeling a bit helpless, knocked back, and guiltily not mentioning that you've only used them *once*. The grass tickles your upper arms and the skin on your elbows is starting to hurt from the pressure of holding you up. Dew soaks through your shirt which *had* been mostly dry, since you were an outfielder and have never been a particularly active person in the first place (read: too ungainly and uncoordinated to entertain the notion of playing a sport well.) "They were the only ones I had."

He looks angry. "You idiot. You're supposed to break them in first."

This isn't exactly the first impression you wanted to make, but then you didn't particularly have anything else in mind. Just you would have preferred not to look like a damn fool. You snatch your shoe away from him, noticing, oddly, that his knuckles have scabs and

scratches on them. However, you say nothing as you tie your cleats' laces together and fling them over your shoulder. As you try to lever yourself up, a hand presses you back down. "No way," he says through gritted teeth.

"Get your hands off me," you tell him, and it takes him aback—you too, since you hadn't exactly planned on it. So you add an awkward, "Please." And then, because you don't want him to hate you, "Sorry."

Instead of being angry he shrugs. "No problem."

You think that's it, he's never going to talk to you again, but of course he didn't get a reputation of being a prankster for nothing (he's the reason that none of the delivery places within a ten mile radius will come to the school). You find yourself hefted into the air and being carried bridal style off of the field.

After that it's like he's always around, just...there. You could swear he was never around this much before. Not really in the way, and he doesn't really talk to you—and besides, he has no legitimate reason to be around the labs.

And then you realize it's one of the other guys in the lab. You hadn't known he was gay, or maybe they're just close friends but the way that they hang all over each other, draping over one another's shoulders, sometimes butting heads, and digging at each others' ribs with their elbows, it's obvious that they're really close. Closer than friends could ever be.

So you swallow whatever attraction you had formed for him, squash down the hope that he was hanging around the place for you, and you go back to your work because that's why you're there. Except you can't quite manage to work up the nerve to smile back at him amicably when he's there, you just keep your head down and avoid him as much as possible, and think he probably doesn't notice.

Then you have the day from hell.

First your car won't start when you put the key in, and then it starts raining. You're carrying a bunch of papers—exams from the class you're teaching that need to be entered tonight if you're going to get done with anything in a timely manner—and there's nobody else in the parking lot so you're just sitting there in your dead car, with the rain pounding on the windows, holding your phone in front of your face to see who you can call who might be able to pick you up. Nobody who is close enough will be awake, or you don't know them well enough to ask them for help.

Obviously you aren't expecting the knock on the window, so the shriek is well warranted.

It's him.

He's holding an umbrella and, when you pop open your door he specifically holds it so that it covers you as well as himself.

"You okay? You've been sitting here for the past thirty minutes."

"Are you a stalker or something?" You snap.

Immediately his expression—or what of it you can see from the orange light coming from the street lamp—closes off, and he says, "Okay, sorry for asking."

You reach out to grab his coat. "No. I'm sorry it's just-" You take a deep breath. "I'm having a bad day," you say, with an unexpected quaver in your voice that you try to cover up by coughing at the end of your sentence. But that coughing turns into a sob, and that sob turns into full on crying and then. And then. And then he's leaning down to kiss you, the umbrella caught between the roof of your car and the door, shielding you from the rain, though a few drops manage to damp his hair, caught in the strands.

The kiss is hot, sloppy, and more than you can take with your nose all congested from crying so you push him back, though you keep a strong grip on the lapel of his jacket so he doesn't misunderstand.

"You...You have a boyfriend," you say accusingly, though it comes out whiny due to the fact that your voice isn't as firm as it could be, and you've just been crying.

"Boyfriend?" He looks puzzled and you can feel the little bubble of hope that came into being when he first leaned down swell a bit. "You mean..." He bites down on a smile and then leans back in to kiss you softly, sucks on your bottom lip until you're lightheaded. "You're talking about the person I've been visiting? He's my stepbrother. I've only been using him as an excuse to visit your lab."

"Oh."

"Come home with me," he says.

You blush with your entire body. "Okay."

"Good." He straightens up, lifting the umbrella with a slight push because one of the rods got caught against the roof.

To the You I Love in 20 Years

What does it mean to fall in love, you wonder. Is it the sensation of painful happiness welling in your chest whenever you think of that person, or is it the heat of longing to touch them with every fiber of your being, until your fingertips burn with the desire to feel connected?

It doesn't mean much. Life doesn't change. The platform is still as airy and empty as it used to be, and the rhythmic clatter of the trains passing by mimics your heartbeat in your ears until they're gone, and you're left alone with the din echoing in your head.

Who knew that love was so devastating.

Certainly not you, just a day ago, when you got the worst haircut of your life and went over to his house—because you have, had the misfortune of living right next to the love of your life—so he could fix it and while he had the scissors to the back of your neck as you held as still as possible, even when he said he was leaving tomorrow. The tip of the scissors' blades scraped the nape of your neck, just below the hairline.

"Hey! Don't move," he said as he smoothed away the sting.

You mumbled sorry and that was the end of that, because the sickly feeling in your stomach and the loud pounding in your ears made your tongue dumb, too thick in your mouth to say anything. Because he was moving away, which would have been devastating enough. And because you just then realized that you loved him. You realized and then you went home, your mouth sealed shut despite him asking several times if you were all right—you just nodded and shrugged and rolled your eyes. He cares, he cares, he cares. And it scares you. Because loving him too much might break you.

Because he's leaving you behind, and you just discovered you loved him. Have loved him for a long time. Ever since you can remember, probably.

You met when his mother started giving you voice lessons. Afterward she would have him walk you home; he would protest, him being several years older than you, and cooler besides, but he never neglected his duty. Not even when you got older.

Somehow you just got accustomed to him being there, even when you got into high school and he was a senior, walking beside you with a swagger and his jeans slung low on his hips and his baggy plaid shirt and his hair tousled like he just got out of bed. You were a freshman, still getting bullied, but you cherished the time you had together even after you realized that he hung out with the guys who bullied you. They didn't do it when he was around, but he wasn't always there.

Then he found the bruises, and the next day he was suspended from school. You were fifteen then; he was just about to graduate, so the suspension was actually more of a strong suggestion, not even on record, since he had just gotten a full ride to the state college even despite his reputation.

You went over to his place even though you didn't have voice lessons—your mouth was cut on the inside. He was laying on his bed, on top of the covers still fully dressed. The sunlight lit up his room, making it almost unbearably bright. Even though he had his eyes closed, you could tell he wasn't sleeping but you tried to stay quiet anyway. But he surprised you by

tugging on your shirt until you fell off balance and landed nearly on top of him. You both groaned at that, and he cracked an eye open.

"Still got them bruises?"

You swallowed and nodded. Sat back on your heels while straddled across the tops of his thighs. "You?"

He hitched the edge of his white shirt up and you could see the red-purple splotches quietly forming on his stomach, which tensed as he pulled the shirt all the way off. You undid the buttons of our own shirt with trembling fingers to show him yours. Except it weren't just bruises. They'd been wearing cleats when they beat you up. You gasped when his thumb dug into one of the lighter bruises on your hip. Not maliciously, but carefully, like he was trying to squeeze the hurt out of it. His hand was warm, and the ache was deep and dull but somehow pleasant at the same time. You reached out to do the same to him, but your touch was light, lighter, and your fingertips barely brushed the edge of one. His bruise was hot, hotter even than his hand.

His palm pressed harder onto your hip and you gasped again. This time the pain-pleasure sensation hit you in the gut; you felt it all the way to your toes.

"God, I want to mess you up," he said. But that didn't scare you. What happened next did.

So you ran.

You ran because you didn't know what else to do. You ran with the sensation of his too-hot breath on the soft skin of your stomach, the delicate press of his lips to the bruise that spanned from the bottom of your ribs to just below your navel. You ran until summer had almost ended, and your dad took you out into your backyard to give you a haircut before school started. To make you look respectable.

When you returned, he said nothing, just took your self-deprecating grimace and gave you a lopsided grin in return. You spent the last day of summer on his porch, as he cleaned up your hair, the ice slowly melting in the two glasses of lemonade that his mother put out for you both. He ran his fingers through your hair several times as he finished up, his pinky just grazing the shell of your ear.

That was when you knew.

Who knew that love was so devastating.

3cm Love (Between You and Me)

He is an idiot.

Then again, so are you.

Used to be you thought idiots were something like electrons, their oblivious stupidity causing them to bounce off each other so they couldn't be together for too long, otherwise something'd explode. 'Course that was before you figured out that you were just as much of an idiot as him. More, maybe.

See, he and you live across from each other. Been that way since you were five and snotty-nosed, beating each other up for stealing toys or something. Right, and you put a bug in his hair. You've always been the mature one - obviously.

Except there's one little problem with that (it's plagued you for years): you can see into his bedroom.

He doesn't know.

You only really found out in high school: senior year. Which was a problem. Terrible times for you. Well, it wasn't anything really terrible, just you being you - you're horrible at making decisions, and choosing a college was a trial. Your grades weren't bad, weren't great, but somewhere bordering on good, so there were a fair amount of colleges you could choose from. What was really terrible was finding out that your best sometimes-friend-full-time-pain-in-the-ass was moving across the country. And then finding out that you could see into his bedroom from your bedroom.

And your luck being just what it was, the first time you realized, he was beating off.

With his curtains open.

You've never liked being in your bedroom, so in elementary room you made regular trips to your parents' room despite not ever having nightmares and once you got into middle school, started sleeping on the couch.

Anyway, back to him beating off. You realized right away that you were too interested in him and what he was doing, so you closed the curtains. Then you chanced to peek through the tiny gap between them and you saw that he'd noticed that you were there. You couldn't interpret the look on his face so you ducked down on your bed and laid there for a moment. From that day on you decided to sleep in your room again. Your moment of unintentional voyeurism goes unpunished.

And then your big mouth gets in the way. You blurt it out one day, all in a rush.

He doesn't even look phased. You feel almost faint.

"You wanna see me do it again?" he asks.

So, that becomes a thing.

Watching becomes touching and touching becomes. Well. It's better not to put words to it, you think, else it might break.

You wonder what you are to each other now. Sometimes his pupils get wide and blown when he looks at you. You Google that shit because, well, what else are you going to do. And you realize, maybe he loves you? Or is in serious lust for you. Either way, you don't know what to do and you think that both of you are idiots for not saying anything.

It happens though.

One day, you're standing at the sink washing dishes and he comes up from behind you and nibbles at your ear. You suck in a breath and almost drop the plate you're scrubbing back into the basin of the sink. You tell him to stop, while simultaneously elbowing him in the stomach.

You ask what he's doing, why, without turning around. Your hands are full of suds and wrinkly from being submerged in water too long. And even though you've been together for most of your life, you can't seem to gather the courage to turn around. Just turn around, you think. It's not hard.

You gulp as he stays silent. Maybe he's left.

"I'm sorry," he says. Then he leaves. You can feel his absence like a hole in your heart.

You can't leave it at that.